



Committee On Finance

Max Baucus, Ranking Member

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Floor Statement of U.S. Max Baucus on Senate Passage of Katrina Health Relief

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) Today, U.S. Senator Max Baucus, ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, delivered the following floor statement urging passage of S. 1716, the Emergency Health Care Relief Act.

Baucus drafted the legislation with Chairman Grassley of the Senate Finance Committee. A tax relief measure co-authored by Baucus and Grassley was signed into law by President Bush last Friday. The statement follows:

Floor Statement of U.S. Senator Max Baucus The Emergency Health Care Relief Act

Mr. President, Tina Eagerton fled Louisiana for Clearwater, Florida, to escape Hurricane Katrina. As Tampa Bay's 10 News reported, Tina is 7 months pregnant. She has a high-risk pregnancy. Plainly, she needs a doctor's care.

But Tina could not find a Florida doctor who would accept her Louisiana Medicaid card. Tina said: "I've called some doctors, [but they say] 'We don't know what to do.' I guess nobody has gotten the memo."

Mr. President, Congress needs to get the memo. We need to pass S. 1716, the Emergency Health Care Relief Act. We need to pass it today.

For the last 4 weeks, we have seen the terrible destruction that Katrina wrought: more than a thousand people dead, a million people displaced, hundreds of billions in damage. I went down to the Gulf to see for myself. It is worse than the pictures.

And Katrina has exposed deep problems that plague American society: chronic poverty, stark inequality, strained race relations.

Mr. President, we cannot solve all of these problems today. Some are so pervasive, so severe, that a single bill cannot remedy them. They require a sustained national debate, a reexamination of what we as a Nation hold dear.

We cannot fix everything today. But we can fix some things today. And one thing that we can fix is the lack of health coverage for tens of thousands of Katrina survivors. We can, and must, pass the Emergency Health Care Relief Act today.

This broadly-supported legislation would provide victims of Hurricane Katrina with the health-care services that they urgently need. As we so often do, Chairman Grassley and I worked together on this bill. We worked together on the Katrina tax legislation, which the President signed Friday, and which is even now putting cash into the hands of Katrina victims. And we worked together on this health bill, as well.

Our health bill would provide temporary Medicaid coverage for Katrina survivors, available through a streamlined application. These benefits would be available right away. And those eligible would get coverage for up to 5 months, with a possible extension of 5 months.

Pregnant women like Tina Eagerton, as well as children, would be eligible for help at higher income levels.

To support those who have private health insurance, our bill would allow individuals to keep their current coverage with assistance from the federal government.

And our bill would set up a fund to help health-care providers deal with their tremendous uncompensated care losses. These funds would go to providers who experienced a surge in patient load from the evacuation of Katrina victims. And these funds would go to those facilities who no longer have the patient base to make ends meet.

But it is not just health-care providers who are incurring uncompensated care expenses. States are, as well. Texas has taken in 200,000 Katrina evacuees. Katrina is adding \$30 million a month in costs to the Texas Medicaid program.

Our legislation would provide Texas — and other states caring for Katrina evacuees — with full federal Medicaid funding for those evacuees.

The bill would also cover all of the costs of Louisiana's and Mississippi's Medicaid and Child Health programs for 2006, with the same treatment being provided to a number of particularly ravaged counties in Alabama.

And this legislation would give solid help to those who receive TANF and unemployment insurance.

In short, Mr. President, our bill does a great deal to help Katrina victims in common-sense ways. And as a result, our bill has broad support, from consumer, health-care, and business groups. Here is what some of those groups have to say about our bill: [chart]

The American Red Cross says:

“As our nation faces the challenging task of ensuring that the victims of Hurricane Katrina receive the care, compassion, and support needed to reconstruct their lives, legislation such as yours helps to ensure that their health care needs will be met.”

The American Hospital Association says that our bill “is an important first step toward getting assistance to the thousands of people who have been affected by the storm, as well as those who are providing their care.”

And the National Governors Association says:

“The nation’s Governors are very supportive of your relief package. [The] additional investments in Medicaid and TANF that your relief package provides will be critical to help these individuals put their lives back together and regain some sense of stability.”

Mr. President, Congress has taken some steps to respond to the Katrina disaster. We have passed more than \$60 billion in funding for the Federal Emergency Management Agency. And we have passed Katrina-targeted tax relief. These bills are helping out in what may become the biggest relief operation for a natural disaster in American history.

But we must do more to help the victims of this natural — and national — disaster. We must provide Katrina victims with access to health care. And we must do it now.

Americans have responded generously to the Katrina crisis. Americans have given of their time, through the efforts of tens of thousands of volunteers. Americans have opened their homes. Web sites report offers for shelter totaling nearly 270,000 beds so far.

And Americans have opened their wallets in unprecedented fashion. In the 3 weeks following the hurricane, Americans contributed more than \$1.2 billion to help Katrina victims.

But private individuals can do only so much. At some point, Congress needs to help. We need to help people like Rosalind Breaux. Of Rosalind Breaux, the Chicago Tribune reported:

“Diagnosed with colon cancer on May 1, Ms. Breaux was scheduled for her third round of chemotherapy on August 31, a day after flooding began to wreck New Orleans and Charity Hospital, where she had been receiving care. Breaux and her family ended up settling temporarily in Baton Rouge. Nauseated, with constant fatigue, profound weakness, and frequent pain, Breaux has been trying to survive the stress of her situation as best she could. Meanwhile, her husband, a policeman at Charity Hospital, has lost his job and there are questions about whether his insurance will pay for her care. ‘It’s been so frustrating, not knowing what’s going to happen,’ she said. ‘I just pray I can make it through this.’”

Mr. President, we need to help. Congress needs to ensure that people like Rosalind Breaux and Tina Eagerton have health care coverage. That is the least that we can do.

Let us rise to the level of caring and sympathy of the American people, who have given so much to the victims of this disaster. Let us take action to meet the needs of those whom Katrina has displaced and disadvantaged. And let us do our part to help this region and its people to get back on their feet.

We can do this today, by passing the Emergency Health Care Relief Act.

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